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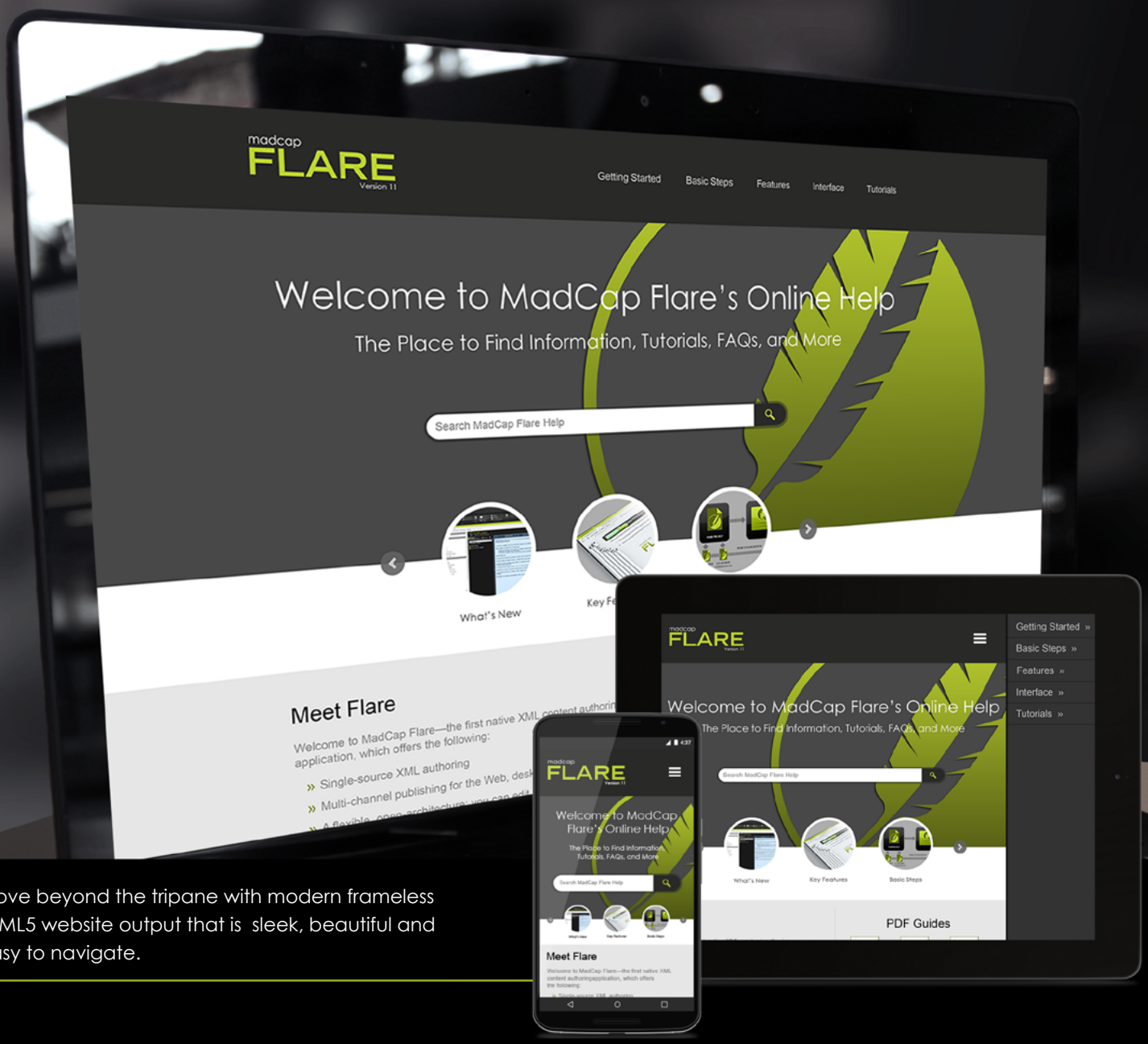

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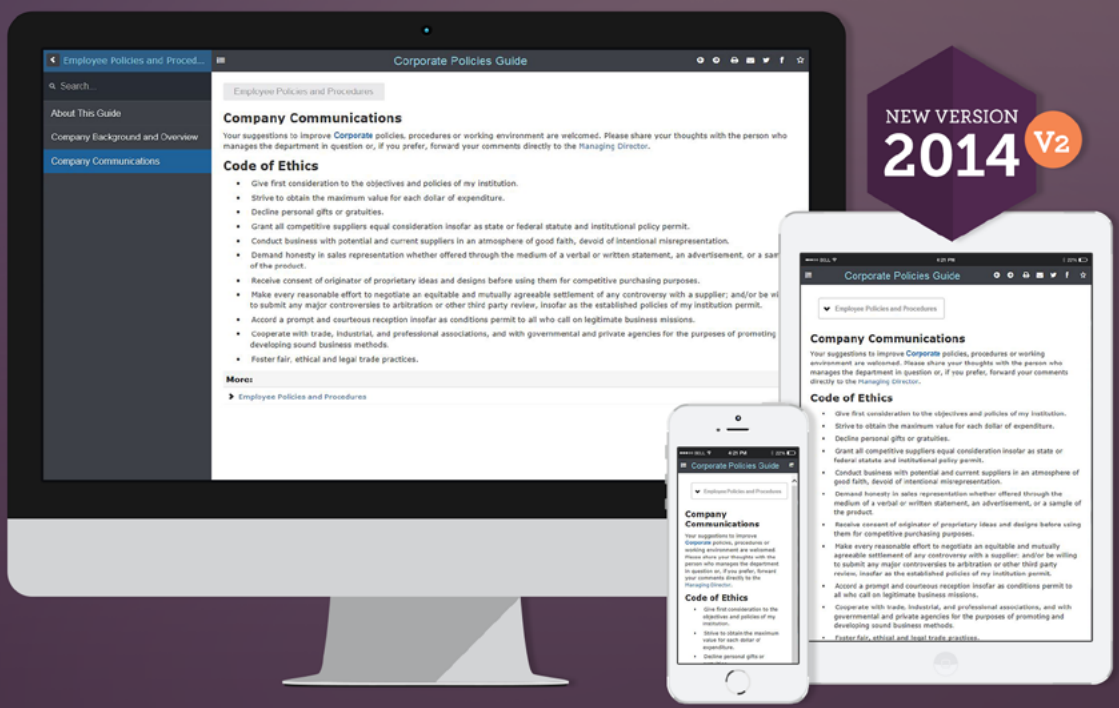

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A Note from the Editor

THE APRIL ISSUE of *Intercom* includes three articles on international technical communication. Allen Brown has written an article about trust in virtual teams around the globe. He provides an overview of the factors affecting the creation and maintenance of trust in virtual teams, along with strategies technical communicators can use to develop trust among team members. In her article, Myriam Siftar explains how technical writers can benefit from cross-cultural training, especially by keeping translation in mind. She asserts that cross-cultural training can provide us with critical knowledge of cultural differences that affect tone and word or image choice when writing and designing documents. Kirk St.Amant's article reconsiders social media in global contexts. He explains that not all cultures use social services in the same manner, and that the use of social media in global contexts goes beyond translation. He defines a range of factors from geopolitical to cultural in explaining proper use of social media in global contexts.

Other articles in the issue include an update by Marta Rauch on best practices for enterprise gamification and recommends a gamification design framework based Kevin Werbach's book, *For the Win: How Game Thinking Can Revolutionize Your Business*. And in her article, Carol Leahy has written on the core soft skills technical communicators need to gain influence, such as socializing with coworkers and other organizational teams.

I'm pleased to announce that they next two upcoming issues of *Intercom* will be guest edited. The May issue has been edited by Derek Ross of Auburn University and focuses on ethics. For the June issue, Jack Molisani of Prospring Technical Staffing has collected articles focusing on power and gaining organizational influence as a technical communicator. These are going be excellent issues on timely topics.

Are you interested in writing an article for *Intercom*? Visit *http://intercom.stc.org/* for the editorial calendar, deadlines, and instructions on submitting. Or simply email me with your ideas!

—Liz Pohland
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Establishing Trust in Virtual Teams

By ALLEN BROWN

IMAGINE THAT YOU'VE just been assigned to work on a virtual team project with colleagues stationed around the country and across the world. The goal for the project is to plan, produce, and deliver a hardware maintenance manual (HMM) for an Android tablet that's soon to hit the world market. As the technical communicator charged with managing this project, you'll be responsible for the design, layout, and organization of the HMM content. To do your job, you'll need the expertise of engineers, writers, editors, graphic designers, and other professionals dispersed across the country and globe. Though your skills and background are well suited for the project scope, you can expect to experience some of the same anxieties of starting a new job, not the least of which are learning new faces, new names, and new personalities.

Fortunately, a few of your team members will be employees of your same company stationed in other offices, so you'll already have something in common, even though you've never met them in person. Others, however, will be subcontractors, complete strangers, who bring a unique expertise needed for the project. The key to success in this project? Trust. That is, the individuals involved in this situation must trust one another to work collaboratively, communicate effectively, and follow through on commitments. Such trust is essential to the functioning of virtual teams because it helps facilitate a smooth flow of information and an open exchange of knowledge and resources. This article provides an overview of the factors affecting the creation and maintenance of trust in virtual teams. It will also present strategies technical communicators can use to develop trust among team members when working in such contexts.

Understanding the Dynamics of Trust

For decades, the role of trust in interpersonal and institutional communication has been a major focus of multidisciplinary research—especially the importance of trust in organizational effectiveness (Jarvenpaa, Shaw, & Staples). The presence of trust enhances productivity, job satisfaction, camaraderie, and loyalty (Alston and Tippett; Goris, Vaught, & Pettit). Even in the best of circumstances, group dynamics in collocated teams can often be complex and fraught with tension. These are only compounded when team members are not collocated and their collaborations are filtered through computer-mediated communication (Brewer, 2010; forthcoming). To address these factors, we need to first come to a common understanding of what trust is.

Trust, an abstract concept, is not easily defined. Most definitions associate it with vulnerability, uncertainty, risk, and relinquishing control to others (Harell & Daim; Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman; Meyerson, Weik, & Kramer, 1996; de Laat, 2005; Coppola, Hiltz, & Rotter). When we trust others we expect that, first and foremost, they will do no harm. We expect that they will act in our best interests, meet expectations, demonstrate integrity, maintain confidentiality, and adhere to culturally acceptable decorum. We expect that they will not compromise our reputation, our livelihood, or anything we value. We generally trust medical professionals to optimize our health and enhance our longevity because they complete rigorous academic and clinical training, pass licensing exams, and work in a highly regulated field with stringent ethical standards. Car salesmen, conversely, are low on the trust scale in our society; they are not known for high

ethical standards and are not subject to any credentialing standards that qualify them to do their jobs. They are notorious for trying to obfuscate pricing strategies so that car shoppers part with as much of their money as possible. From these two examples, then, we can see that the notion of trust is culturally contextual. Individual and communal biases shape how trust is defined and how it plays out in interpersonal relations. With these ideas in mind, we next need to ask, "What factors do we associate with creating trust?"

Characteristics of Trust

Let's return to your role as an information designer for the HMM project. Your boss has explained the importance of this project to your firm in raising its profile and attracting new business. She has also hinted that the success of this project could position you for a promotion. With these added pressures, you need to consider how you'll work effectively and collaboratively with your virtual team members. Although you've worked extensively in collocated teams, this will be the first time working on a large virtual team project, and your instincts tell you that it's going to be different. Your virtual team will need to form rapidly, meet an ambitious deadline, and produce a highly technical deliverable. Members will need to get acquainted, identify roles, learn each other's strengths, establish communication protocols, implement workflow processes, and rely upon each other to meet commitments. In essence, they need to build a coherent team with a high level of trust.

You are a stickler for detail and deadlines, and you function better when working within a clearly defined structure. From your experience in collocated teams, you know that others sometimes approach projects with less rigor and organization than you. As an experienced information developer, you expect this to be the case in a virtual team, and that it may be even more pronounced. Team members ordinarily inclined toward withholding information will need to work more collaboratively and be more forthcoming. Those who tend to dominate will need to step back and learn to invite others to contribute. Team member differences, whether related to personality, work style, communication style, or culture, can generate even more tension and frustration in a virtual team than in one that's collocated. What can you do—and what can you help the team do—to set a positive tone, to establish camaraderie, and to work effectively? What steps can you take in your role to build and maintain trust?

The Nature of Trust in Virtual Teams

Virtual teams are defined as work groups scattered across any number of locations, both domestic and international, that use electronic communication to accomplish tasks and projects (Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1998). In the 1980s, virtual teams were getting work done with telephones and fax machines; more recently, they've been making effective use of file sharing technologies and Web conferencing. Advances in information communication technologies (ICTs) increasingly aid in completing work across various time zones and geographical boundaries and are making global virtual teams more common.

Virtual teams work collectively to accomplish tasks or projects that individual members could not complete on their own (Harrell & Daim). They are usually ad hoc, and as such are often prone to conflicts, misunderstandings, and frustrations. These challenges are only compounded by temporal, spatial, and cultural boundaries that can impede collaboration. For virtual teams, the need for establishing and maintaining trust becomes important in optimizing productivity, in promoting harmony, and in producing quality deliverables; trust can contribute to the development of high performing teams (Brewer, forthcoming; Iacono & Weisband). While achieving such levels of trust is not easy, technical communicators can increase their chances for success by following certain strategies and approaches.

Strategies for Creating Trust in Virtual Teams

Establish competence, credibility, and humanity

In forming any team, whether virtual or collocated, one of the first orders of business is to begin building relationships. In virtual teams, which ordinarily do not meet face-to-face in shared location, it's helpful to set communication among team members in motion even before they meet, speak, email, or join each other on a Web conference. Communicating *early* and *often* is important in virtual teams (Walton; Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1998; Walther & Bunz). As the project leader, you decide that you'll begin by emailing everyone on the team, listing all their names, their organizational affiliations, and their locations. In the email, you provide your own brief biography, and then invite everyone else to share a similar bio sketch. In yours, you model the appropriate information to share, including job title, work experience, educational background, credentials, office hours, time zone, professional memberships, and specific skill sets. It's also helpful to share which versions of various software products you use—because exchanging files with older or newer versions can often wreak havoc. You realize that while your professional accomplishments will help establish your credibility and competence, it's also valuable to share personal information so that team members recognize you as a human being, with a life beyond the office (Brewer, forthcoming). To that end, you share information about your family, place of residence (including where you've lived in the past), interests, hobbies, and favorite vacation spots. If comfortable doing so, team members should also invite one another to connect on social

media channels, particularly LinkedIn. And if anyone is planning time away from work during the project period because of holidays or vacations, everyone needs to be aware of it.

Exchanging bio sketches accomplishes several objectives. First, it begins to establish you as competent and credible, and it sets the stage for helping team members determine how their skills will complement one another. Second, it lays groundwork for social interactions that can transcend mere transactional exchanges associated with project work. Finally, it helps team members find common interests, allowing them to see each other as more alike than different. This can sometimes alleviate some of the isolation that virtual team members often feel (Priest, et al.).

Identifying roles, establishing protocols, creating structure

After everyone has read and exchanged bio sketches, you schedule and arrange a project kick-off Web conference, ensuring that everyone is available to join. Where possible, you encourage team members to activate their webcams, thereby fostering exchanges that approximate face-to-face communication (Brewer, forthcoming). Prior to the meeting, you send an agenda, a detailed project scope, and log-on instructions. When the meeting begins, you welcome all, express enthusiasm for the project, and point out some basic functions of the Web conference tool, including how to raise a hand, how to send individual or group instant messages, and how to mute the audio.

After team member introductions, which should include some preliminary information about how they will contribute to the project, you facilitate a discussion about the following:

- Project mission, scope, deadlines, and related topics
- Frequency of team meetings
- Guidelines for responding to emails, phone calls, and other communication in a timely manner
- Guidelines for polite email salutations and closings
- How to communicate and reach team members during urgent situations
- When members go missing or become unresponsive, what steps should the team take to reel them back?
- Roles and responsibilities
- Guidelines for expression of confusion and frustration
- How to deliver criticism tactfully and constructively
- Protocols for celebrating successes and delivering praise
- How and when to communicate unanticipated setbacks or delays
- Technologies most suited to particular situations and tasks
- Explanations for explicit communication to minimize misunderstandings

Team members should come to a consensus about each topic, thereby implicitly endorsing a series of team norms and standards. In effect, the members are creating a team culture, a series of guidelines that will aid them in working together and in exchanging information and resources (Brewer, forthcoming; Priest et al.; Walther & Bunz; Alston & Trippett; de Laat). Those who follow the guidelines will demonstrate trustworthiness. Those who do not will compromise their trustworthiness and will call into question their value to the team (Walther and Brunz; Gouldner).

The importance of persona

Now that team members have agreed to specific roles, responsibilities, and processes, you realize it's important for them to understand that even with a solid structure in place, misunderstandings and frustrations are bound to happen, particularly among virtual team members who rely on ICTs to communicate and collaborate. With that in mind, you decide to raise awareness about common communication challenges, particularly among members with widely divergent cultural and linguistic differences. You share with your team that team trust is enhanced when members make concerted efforts to exhibit specific traits.

> "Seek first to understand, then to be understood." This is an important and valuable leadership principle, and one that can, to a great extent, serve as an overarching theme in global virtual teams.

There are any number of traits both in theory and practice that have been identified as important to establishing trust. Sztompka identifies reputation, performance, and appearance as elements in projecting trust, as outlined below:

- Reputation is associated with a solid track record for accomplishments.
- Performance is associated with recent accomplishments, i.e., "What have you done for me lately?"
- Appearance is associated with your outward presentation of self and whether you look responsible and professional.

Closely related to these traits are competence, consideration, and social capital earned through reliability (Alston & Tippett; de Latt; Walton). These traits can be exhibited by doing the following:

- Proving that your knowledge, skill, and expertise can benefit the team.

- Exhibiting benevolence, respect, and goodwill toward other team members—and respecting cultural and linguistic differences.
- Demonstrating reliability by following through on obligations and commitments.

By stressing the value of these traits, you help the team understand the importance of creating a favorable online persona or ethos (Brewer, 2010; de Laat; Lipnack & Stamps; St.Amant). You explain to your team that part of their online persona is related to their presence, or lack thereof, on the Internet. For example, during an Internet search, can your teammates find your name listed on your company's website? Do they find your LinkedIn profile, and does it reflect key credentials and accomplishments, including awards and recognition? Have you published articles, contributed to blogs, or been quoted as a subject matter expert? Is your name associated with professional organizations, and is there evidence online that you are a respected leader in your field? In the age of social media, if you don't have an Internet presence, you may not be considered relevant or credible, particularly among younger generations.

You also stress to team members that they should take care in projecting the appropriate persona to team members in email messages, Web conferences, and in all ICT exchanges. Persona is even more important in virtual teams because communication occurs through the media filter of information communication technologies, which can distort messages (Brewer). Team members, therefore, don't have the benefit of in-person social cues such as facial expressions, body language, and voice intonation. To compensate, they will need to be intentional in adapting their communication style to both the communication medium and the cultural and linguistic conventions of their team members (Brewer, 2010, forthcoming).

When interacting with colleagues in China, for example, team members should be aware of the importance that Asian cultures place on status, hierarchy, seniority, formality, authority, and long-term relationships. Furthermore, they should know that Asian cultures tend to be less direct in their communication style. Members of Asian cultures may be reticent to participate in Web conference discussions, but more comfortable sharing feedback using email or other forms of text-based written expression (Barazova & Yuan). Asians often consider Americans to be direct, overbearing, and informal in their communication style, which for them may seem arrogant and off-putting. Workplace humor, sarcasm, and irony may not translate well across cultures, and in many instances will be inappropriate or disrespectful. (St.Amant; Axtell). Team members who recognize and respect these differences and alter their communication styles accordingly will demonstrate more sensitivity and engender more trust. As team leader, you explain to the Americans in the group that they will be well served by tempering their communication so that it is less direct and less assertive. You suggest that exhibiting humility, formality, and respect, particularly early in in the teambuilding process, can help to establish an appropriate tone (St.Amant). In summary, you make your team members aware that they should be sensitive to messages conveyed by their online persona. Their verbal expression, written expression, and nonverbal expression can build trust or dismantle it.

For global virtual teams, a particularly useful resource for learning about cultural differences is the Hofstede Center website: *http://geert-hofstede.com/countries.html*. Geert Hofstede is a Dutch social psychologist who shaped much of our knowledge about cross-cultural communication through his theory of cultural dimensions. Information on this website can aid team members in understanding how cultural differences play out in interpersonal and organizational communication.

Conclusion

Collocated, face-to-face groups regularly contend with tensions created by differences in politics, religion, ethnicity, gender, age, and personal bias. Differences such as these are only compounded when they cross national,

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cultural, hierarchal, and linguistic barriers, and when they occur through any number of technological media that may distort, alter, or delay messages or their intended meaning. Bringing these challenges to the fore is an excellent strategy for fostering greater trust, knowledge transfer, and productivity in a global virtual team where cultural, spatial, temporal, and linguistic differences are at play.

As you guide your team through the process of building structure and trust, you recall a maxim from the late Stephen Covey, the author of many books, including *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, who advises others to "Seek first to understand, then to be understood." This is an important and valuable leadership principle, and one that can, to a great extent, serve as an overarching theme in global virtual teams (and in all teams, whether collocated or distributed).

Team members will be well served by making a concerted effort to understand others, their background, their worldview, and their cultural differences. By doing this, they establish common ground and learn to negotiate their exchanges in ways that will promote greater harmony. By taking the time to observe, to listen, to understand, and to adapt behaviors and communication styles to suit the situation, team members will lay the groundwork for stronger, high-trust relationships that will benefit both the project and the members tasked with completing it.

ALLEN BROWN *is a senior director with the Marriott Foundation for People with Disabilities and has served on many virtual and distributed project teams. He is a graduate student in the Master of Science in technical communication management program at Mercer University in Macon, GA.*

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Technical Writers Can Benefit from Cross-cultural Training

By MYRIAM SIFTAR

IN AN ARTICLE in the January 2015 issue of *Intercom*, Val Swisher exhorts technical writers to write for translation regardless of whether the content will actually be translated. Simpler, consistent writing will be more easily understood by the millions of Americans with low reading skills and for whom English is a second language. Besides, some people will just run your content through Google or Bing Translate and get better results if the original text is already optimized for translation.

I would like to take this a step further. Technical writers should always write for translation and cross-cultural training can help in these efforts. The skills that such training develops can help anyone become a better communicator, especially when communicating with those whose backgrounds differ from yours.

Learning About Yourself

In her brief list of some of the ways that writing can be optimized for translation, Swisher notes that the elimination of idioms and jargons takes practice. Many of these words and phrases are so much a part of us that they seem entirely natural. Other aspects of writing also come from a lifetime of cultural and situational experiences: our choice of vocabulary in general, the tone of voice we use, and the kinds of examples we choose. No list of rules can overcome such engrained habits.

Cross-cultural training starts by working on your own cultural awareness. Participants are exposed to facts and information about their own cultures, preconceptions, and values that they may not have thought about. Standing back and examining the sources of our own worldviews from the outside prepares us for the fact that different backgrounds can lead to different worldviews.

Learning About Others

The next step in cross-cultural training is learning about some of the major differences in how people from different cultures and experiences may see the world. Cross-cultural training will help you to see these kinds of differences as not "good" or "bad," but rather as a fact of life that must be addressed in order to interact well with diverse groups of people.

Sociologist Geert Hofstede developed a system for comparing cultures on four key dimensions. (Later one more was added, but it is not as relevant to this article.) Although the system has been criticized, it is still widely accepted that the framework captures some of the salient aspects on which cultures differ. The dimensions are:

- **Power Distance Index:** How much the less powerful members of society accept the existing power hierarchy.
- **Individualism:** Whether society members are expected to make their own decisions and be responsible for their own success or failure as opposed to being integrated into supportive groups with their own rules, traditions, and mores that can override those of the individual (collectivism).
- **Masculinity:** The degree to which a society values assertiveness and competitiveness over nurturing and caring.
- **Uncertainty Avoidance:** Reluctance to take risks.

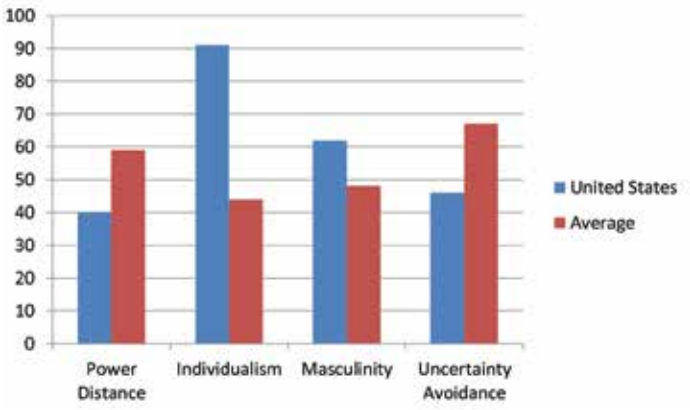

Figure 1. The United States Compared to Average Scores of 78 other countries (Source: geerthofstede.eu/dimension-data-matrix*)*

As compared to many other cultures, the United States has less of an accepted social hierarchy, expects people to take care of themselves, values competition and assertiveness, and has a greater tolerance for risk-taking. Much of the world acts from a different cultural context than the one that Americans often take for granted.

What Does This Have to Do with Technical Writing?

In technical writing, knowledge of these cultural differences could affect the tone you use (more stratified usually means more formal), the adjectives and adverbs you use (the value of different attributes may not be universally accepted), and the examples you choose to illustrate a concept (these may not have the same resonance in all cultures).

For example, Swisher suggests that technical writing has become more colloquial and familiar in tone, as compared to 20 years ago when it "tended to be scientific, rich in nouns, and grammatically accurate." Aside from the problems that this new style of writing can pose for translation, it may also not set the right tone for different cultures, where a "familiar" approach from strangers may not be welcome. Furthermore, if you realize how many idioms and jargon reflect culturally shared values or experiences that might not be relevant in many places in the world, you become more sensitive to your own use of colloquial language.

Effective global communication doesn't always require translation, but it does require being conscious of the many opportunities for misunderstanding that can arise when you are dealing with people who have a very different culture and history. Writers who have taken part in cross-cultural training will have a better capacity for assessing those aspects of their writing that

might be problematic for people from other cultures and backgrounds. Their writing should not only be simpler, but it should also be more neutral in tone and freer from a reliance on cultural assumptions to impart a message.

In some cases, we recommend a cultural assessment of materials before translation. This is because so much material is written without regard to issues of language and cultural differences. It is only during translation that these issues appear. A writer with cross-cultural skills is more likely to turn out a product that will be ready for translation and adaptation for different cultures when the need arises.

Other Lessons

Cross-cultural training can impart other skills that can be useful, not only to technical writers, but in many business settings.

- **Listening skills:** With their senses more attuned to differences in perception, those writers should also be better listeners, able to interpret and evaluate feedback from others, and open to learning ever more about how cultural differences should impact their writing.
- **Interpersonal skills:** All writers may not work in groups, but all of them have to interact with others on some level, to get instructions, to clarify details with technicians, and to respond to editors. Cross-cultural training can also improve these interpersonal relations, both because of the writer's improved listening skills and because of their increased sensitivity to the hidden cultural factors behind people's behavior. If, as Swisher argues, writing for translation will make you a better technical writer, cross-cultural skills should improve not only your writing but also your ability to communicate at all levels, both in writing and in person.

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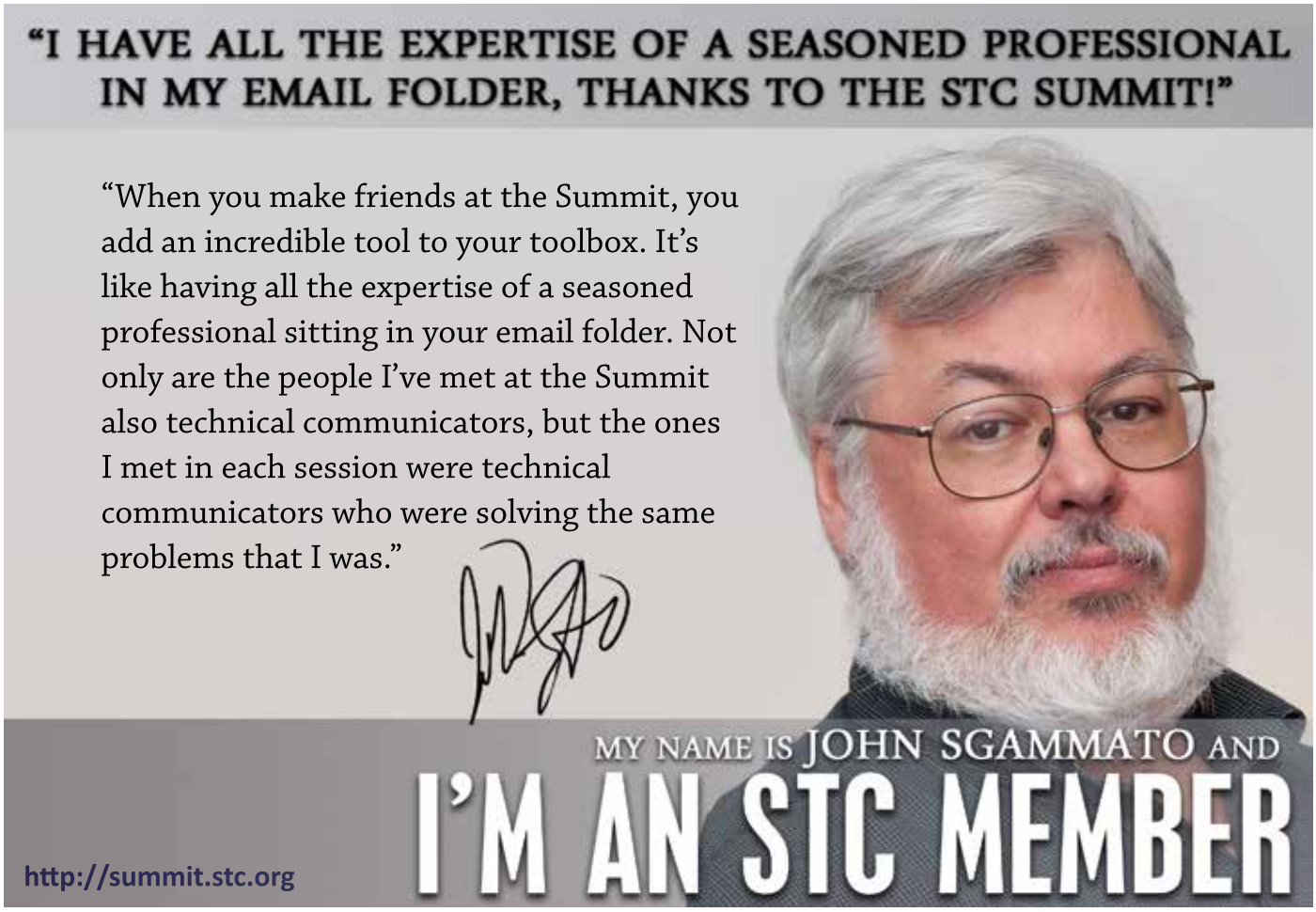
"I HAVE ALL THE EXPERTISE OF A SEASONED PROFESSIONAL IN MY EMAIL FOLDER, THANKS TO THE STC SUMMIT!"
"When you make friends at the Summit, you add an incredible tool to your toolbox. It's like having all the expertise of a seasoned professional sitting in your email folder. Not only are the people I've met at the Summit also technical communicators, but the ones I met in each session were technical communicators who were solving the same problems that I was."
MY NAME IS JOHN SGAMMATO AND
I'M AN STC MEMBER
http://summit.stc.org

Reconsidering Social Media for Global Contexts

By KIRK ST.AMANT | *Fellow*

SOCIAL MEDIA IS increasingly becoming a standard part of the technical communicator's toolkit. At the same time, the international use of social media on the rise. Facebook, for example, has roughly 1.4 billion users worldwide (Company Info., 2015). Similarly, some 284 million persons around the world are monthly Twitter users (About Twitter, 2015), and LinkedIn connects 330 million+ individuals in over 200 countries and territories (About Us, 2015). It would therefore seem logical for technical communicators to use social media to connect with global audiences. Yet not all cultures use these technologies in the same way, nor do all individuals worldwide turn to the same social networking services to interact.

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In truth, the effective use of social media in global contexts involves more than translating a Facebook post or localizing the content posted to LinkedIn. Rather, it requires technical communicators to understand a range of factors from the geopolitical to the cultural. Doing so is no easy task. However, by answering certain questions, technical communicators can better use social media to connect to audiences around the globe.

Question 1: What social media are available to international audiences?

Facebook seems to be an almost standard technology when it comes to daily communication. With over 250 million users in Asia, Facebook would appear to be an essential tool for reaching audiences across that continent (Internet Users in Asia). It would certainly seem to be a key technology for communicating with individuals in one of the world's largest markets—the People's Republic of China (PRC). After all, the combination of some 600 million persons with Internet access and an online market worth some $190 billion makes the PRC an ideal location to connect to via Facebook, right (China; Dobbs, et al.)? Well, not exactly.

While Facebook does have a presence in the PRC, that presence is limited to certain users in particular locations, primarily around Shanghai (Woollaston). As a result, citizens of the PRC tend to use other forms of media to connect to social networks. These include instant messaging technologies such as QQ and social networking services (SNSs) such as Weixin (WeChat). For this reason, should technical communicators wish to use social media to interact with individuals in the PRC, they will need to re-consider what SNS they intend to use. Situations such as this one give rise to a second, connected question.

Question 2: What social media are used by individuals in other nations?

LinkedIn has become a powerful networking tool for sharing professional information and exchanging ideas about employment and the job market. While based in the US, LinkedIn's greater network includes a sizable number of global users including some 8 million individuals in China and some 28 million persons in India (About Us). For this reason, LinkedIn would seem to be an excellent tool for sharing professional information and ideas on a global scale. But it's not the only employment-related SNS available to users in different nations. In fact, in a number of countries, competing technologies exist, and they connect large networks of individuals in those nations.

The German-based SNS XING, for example, has some 6 million members—primarily in German-speaking nations. (LinkedIn only had 2 million users in the same region [del Moral].) Similarly, Viadeo, an employment-focused French SNS, includes some 9 million French members in its network (Acueil). (It also boasts some 25 million users in China!) In fact, Viadeo is so popular in France that it rivals LinkedIn, which also includes 9 million French members in its network (About Us). For these reasons, when connecting to international audiences, technical communicators need to consider the range of SNS available to individuals in other nations. They next need to design content to be distributed across those different SNS channels. So, in the case of France, technical communicators could share employment-related content via LinkedIn, but they also need to share the same content across Viadeo. That way, they can more effectively use social media to tap into greater online networks in France. Such factors, however, beg a follow-up question.

Question 3: Do individuals in other nations use certain social media?

Access is one thing; use is another. If the individuals in a certain nation have ready access to a particular SNS, will they actually make use of it? Moreover, will they do so on a scale that others around the world do? The answer is, "not exactly."

While 75 percent of Germans have online access and a large percentage of them regularly use social media, relatively few Germans have Twitter accounts (Social Media Guide). In fact, of Germany's 80 million citizens, only 4 million turn to Twitter (Coleman). Moreover, public figures—such as political candidates—who do Tweet have much smaller followings than compatriots in other nations. For example, Peer Steinbruck—who recently ran against German chancellor Angela Merkel—had some 60,000 Twitter follower, while his British peer (Ed Miliband of the opposition Labor Party) had over 265,000 followers on Twitter (Coleman; Why Do Germans).

So, with so few Germans using Twitter, technical communicators need to ask if it is worthwhile translating and localizing tweets for German audiences. Ideally, yes—one should try to develop content for all markets, no matter how small. In practice, limited budgets and relatively small returns on investments need to be considered before using certain social media to connect to seemingly small markets. This factor of use—or in this case, lack of use—raises another interesting question.

Question 4: How do individuals in other nations use social media?

For many individuals in the United States, SNSs are vehicles for sharing everything from text about how one's day is going to re-posting interesting online articles to sharing cool YouTube videos. It is thus easy to assume that SNSs can—and should—be used to deliver a range of content to international audiences. But is that a safe assumption to make—and should funding be allocated to developing and delivering such content widely to international markets? The answer is "it depends."

While much of the world does use social media to share a variety of content, that expectation is by no means universal. Research notes that many SNS users in South Korea use such technologies primarily for sharing personal

photos or other kinds of individual-specific images with friends and family (Chapman & Lahav). This perspective differs from using SNSs to share company news and product information—or links to such content (e.g., companion YouTube videos). As a result, the use of social media to share these "other" kinds of content might not connect to—or be used by—as many individuals as one might expect. This situation leads to a connected question.

Question 5: Who do international users expect to include in their online social networks?

It is quite common for US-based SNS users to have 100+ connections in their network. In fact, one sign of prestige often associated with these technologies is to have as many "friends" or "followers" as possible. This desire to connect to seemingly anyone makes it relatively easy for technical communicators to use social media to enter into a range of different online networks. This fascination with openly inviting individuals to build such large networks, however, is not universal.

In China, many use SNSs to interact with a relatively small network of family and close friends. Moreover, social networks tend to be more closed and restricted to person's one knows well vs. little-known—or even unknown—acquaintances. Similar perspectives seem to influence SNS use in Japan, where SNSs such as Mixi do not permit individuals to use bulk email to reach out to everyone in a person's online network. Instead, persons need to be invited individually (Fogg & Iizawa). However, gaining access to an individual's broader network can be an objective for using social media.

The question becomes, "Can technical communicators use SNSs to connect effectively and participate actively with individuals in other nations?" In some cases, the answer might be "you can't just ask to be included; rather you need to be introduced by a known member of the network." The task then becomes identifying the individuals who can provide the introduction needed to enter that network. This aspect moves social media from effective vehicles for contacting persons en masse to individual approaches that involve contacting persons one at a time. Moreover, if the answer is "no; you don't have the background or the connections needed to enter the network," then technical communicators need to consider the best strategies to use when developing content to share with members of such cultures via social media.

Final Thoughts

Each new technology shapes and is shaped by how we use it. And use is often connected to how the members of our culture perceive and interact with the technology. Social media are no different. While the numbers cited in this entry will surely change (or have changed) over time, one central factor remains: cultures view and use these technologies in different ways. The questions raised here highlight key areas technical communicators need to consider when using social media to interact globally. By using these questions as a starting point, technical communicators can develop more informed and more effective strategies for using social media to connect with international audiences.

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Best Practices for Enterprise Gamification

By MARTA RAUCH | *Associate Fellow*

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ENTERPRISE GAMIFICATION IS one of the major software trends of the 21st century. Gamification expert Rajat Paharia calls it "Loyalty 3.0." Using techniques borrowed from software games, gamification can be used to drive behavior in situations outside of games.

Opportunities for Technical Communicators

Enterprises of all sizes and in many industries are ramping up on products, communities, and processes based on gamification principles. The market for gamification has enjoyed dramatic growth, and is predicted to reach $10.02 billion by 2020 (PRNewswire).

By increasing engagement, motivation, and loyalty, gamification can help enterprises achieve business needs (Enterprise Gamification Facts & Figures), such as:

- Spurring innovation
- Engaging internal and external communities
- Motivating and retaining employees
- Meeting customer expectations
- Increasing loyalty

In a survey by market research firm M2, gamification vendors reported that 47% of client implementations supported user engagement, with brand loyalty accounting for 22% and brand awareness for 15% of implementations (M2 Research Press Release). Technical communicators can help their companies succeed by implementing or assisting with gamification projects that follow best practices.

Best Practices for Gamification Projects

To start a gamification project off right, begin by creating a plan. First, define the business need and develop metrics to measure success.

Next, understand your target "players" and learn what motivates them. One source of information is sales, marketing, product management, or user experience teams at your company.

You can then define target behaviors and show how gamification will be used to motivate those behaviors. Sample techniques:

- Game dynamics, such as scenarios and rules

- Game mechanics to help players achieve goals, such as teams, competitions, rewards, feedback, and sharing
- Game components to track players' progress, such as quests, points, levels, badges, and collections

Design appropriate onboarding for novices, and adapt players' journeys as they gain expertise. Keep players interested and motivated throughout all levels of the game, from beginner, to intermediate, to expert. Plan the duration of the project.

You can then define your tools, teams, budget, project plan, milestones, testing, and implementation.

After you get buy-in on your plan, start building the system. Create prototypes, schedule play testing, and iterate the design based on player feedback.

Finally, implement your project and collect metrics to assess how it meets business needs. When you reach your goal, be sure to communicate results and share the success of the project.

As you design and implement your project, you may want to get input from experts or collaborate with consultants. Find useful gamification resources at Gamification.co (*www.gamification.co*). The Engagement Alliance (*engagementalliance.org*) oversees industry certification for gamification designers.

Using a Gamification Design Framework

To help your project succeed, follow the six steps of Kevin Werbach's Gamification Design Framework. The framework is described in his book, *For The Win: How Game Thinking Can Revolutionize Your Business* and his gamification course through Coursera and The Wharton School (*www.coursera.org/course/gamification*). The framework is included here with permission.

1. Define business objectives.
   - **Why** are you gamifying?
   - How will this benefit your **business**?
   - What are your **objectives**?
   - What metrics will **measure success**?
   - What will players **do**?
   - How does this align with your **objectives**?
   - How will you measure **success**?

2. Describe your players.
   - **Who** will participate?
   - What **motivates** them?

3. Delineate target behaviors.
   - What will your players do in your gamified activity?
   - What game elements will be **effective**?

Here are some helpful resources from Game Designer Amy Jo Kim:

- Social Actions Matrix, *http://amyjokim.com/2012/09/19/social-engagement-whos-playing-how-do-they-like-to-engage/*
- Gamification 101: Design the Player Journey, *http://www.slideshare.net/amyjokim/gamification-101-design-the-player-journey*

4. Devise your activity loops.
   - How will you **onboard** new players?
   - How will players **progress** in your system?
   - What type of **feedback** will you provide?
   - How will you keep **experienced players** motivated?
   - Define the **goal** and **rules** of your gamified system.
   - Introduce **strategy** and **tactics.**

5. Don't forget the fun.
   - Will players **enjoy** your gamified system?
   - Get feedback.

6. Deploy the appropriate tools.
   - Will you use a **website**, **mobile** app, or **social** network?
   - Establish if you will use **intrinsic** or **extrinsic** rewards.
   - Determine if you will **develop in house** or **hire a vendor.**
   - Map out testing and deployment.
   - Know how you will **measure your project's success.**

Incorporate the best practices described here to ensure a successful game plan. A winning gamification project can motivate and engage employees and customers to help your company succeed.

MARTA RAUCH *is certified by the Gamification Alliance as a gamification designer. She has worked at two game companies, participates in gamification initiatives as a senior principal information developer at Oracle, and completed a gamification course taught by Kevin Werbach of the Wharton School and Coursera. Marta publishes articles on gamification and shares best practices at conferences, webinars, and workshops. An STC Associate Fellow, a member of the Nominating Committee, and vice president of the Silicon Valley Chapter, she judges STC international awards, reviews Summit proposals, and has received 15 awards for her content at the regional and international level. A member of ACM, IEEE, and CIDM, Marta holds a BA from Stanford University, a teaching credential, and a certificate from the University of California.*

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It's Time to Get Social

By CAROL LEAHY

AS TECHNICAL COMMUNICATORS, we have a wealth of soft skills at our disposal. These soft skills are our calling card and we can use these to gain influence and respect within our organization. In this article, I aim to summarize the core skills that can be of use in gaining influence. In my opinion, the number one reason that technical communicators do not have an influence in their organization is that their work colleagues have no idea what a technical communicator is and what value they bring to the organization as a whole. Why don't they know? Because we don't tell them. This is a shame, especially when you consider the most important soft skill we have is our ability to communicate. This skill is the heart of what we do. We spend our working day communicating within our individual teams so we can effectively communicate how a product functions to the user. But do we ever take the opportunity to communicate with other teams in our organization and show them what we can do? It's time we started.

The Customer Is King

To gain influence, people need to know you exist in the first place. They need to know what a technical writer does and what technical communication is. They need to see what you can do and how it is transferable to other areas of the organization as well as being essential to the area in which you currently work. The soft skills that we possess are becoming ever more important to organizations. This is due in part to the new buzzword *customer experience*. It's all about customers right now. They have a voice and they will use it. The popularity of social media has seen a rise in customers taking to these platforms to voice their grievances with products, companies, and brands. Twitter is the probably the most popular platform for this. When people tweet their frustrations at having to assemble a piece of furniture from really bad instructions, everyone who follows that person can see the tweet. One Twitter account, useless assistance (*@uselessassist*), is becoming popular in the technical communication world for retweeting such tweets to serve as a reminder to organizations that people are frustrated when dealing with poorly prepared assistance. As a technical communicator, I find these tweets eye opening. I cringe at some of the negative comments aimed at my area of expertise, but I also see the benefits of highlighting these comments as it makes people aware of how important the work we do as technical communicators is and (hopefully) starts organizations pumping resources into this area.

As technical communicators, it is our job to write for the customer. We put ourselves in their shoes and write documentation that will be understood by them. We are the voice of the customer and we need to tell people in our organization about this. Organizations are beginning to see how important it is to communicate the right message to customers, and who better to ask to communicate these messages than technical communicators? We know that we are the best people for this job, we just need to show the right people that we have the skills to do it.

Ask Questions

As communicators, if something doesn't sound right to us, we question it. We question why an interface was designed the way it was, we query the naming convention for new functions, and we walk through the help files to make sure each step is correct. I'm not saying that developers or management don't ask these questions, but sometimes you need a fresh pair of eyes at different times of the product cycle. This is something we already do at a team level and it's something that we need to start doing at a higher level. You have a voice; you have an opinion so let it be heard. Speak up in team and depart-

mental meetings. Let people know what work you have been doing all week and what value you are bringing to projects and the company as a whole. If you hear about a project in a meeting that will impact your work, start asking questions about it then. We all have a fear that the questions we ask may be silly, but if you don't understand how something works, then how are you meant to write documentation that explains this for the user?

Detectives in Training

One of the reasons that most people are successful as technical communicators is our attention to detail. We spot things others might not; even the tiniest detail can make a huge difference in a user manual. A lot of the research work we do is detective work, pouring over specifications and talking to developers until we can piece the information together correctly. This is a great skill to have and we need to start using it outside of the team. Find out what is going on in the organization and how you can get involved, especially socially. Is there a team sport that you would like to join? Getting to know your colleagues in a non-work environment can make it easier to find out what's going on in the workplace. The more people know you and know what you can do, the more likely they are to remember that you can help them with communicating a message.

Innate Quest for Knowledge

I think it's fair to say that most technical communicators are lifelong learners of everything. Every technical communicator I know either plays an instrument, writes novels in their spare time, creates patchwork quilts, or is in the midst of acquainting themselves with a new language. Most see these as hobbies, things they do to unwind after a long day. I see these as an example of our quest for knowledge. You need to use these to your advantage. Start a creative group with your work colleagues and create a patchwork quilt for charity, or maybe you have a colleague who plays another instrument that you want to learn, so why not ask them to teach you? If you want to learn a new coding language and you know there is a developer, is he willing to teach you? Don't be shy; show your enthusiasm for learning something new that's relevant to your job no matter how tough it might seem. Enthusiasm goes a long way in a work environment.

Chances are you have a hobby that you love and is related to your job, so use it to bring attention to what you do. For example, an interest in learning Chinese might get you thinking of translating your documentation into other languages and the benefits and value this will bring to your company. Our quest for knowledge helps us build up our list of contacts. The more people know us and what we do, the more influence you can have in the organization

Creative Thinkers

Communicating a big message using an image or just a few sentences is an everyday task for most of us. In a lot of cases, we have to think outside the box to find the solution. We put ourselves in users' shoes to get a sense of how they will use the product and what they are going to look for in the documentation. You want to communicate the message in the simplest way possible, but we also need to be creative. Most of the technical communicators I know have creative hobbies and draw inspiration from them to bring to their work. My hobby is jigsaw puzzles, and I always start with the bits that I can easily put together and keep working until the more difficult pieces are left. My approach to creating images for documentation in my workplace is the mirror image of this. I always start with what I know is definite and slowly build until the last piece, which makes sense of the whole image.

Born Organizers

Technical communicators work to a deadline, so being able to prioritize our work is an essential key skill. If you are a born organizer, chances are you've found yourself working in the technical communication field. We work to deadlines, which more often than not are tight deadlines. Last-minute code changes or changes to a user interface are common in the software industry, so prioritizing our workload to ensure it gets completed in time is crucial. Even though this is an important skill in the workplace, it is not one that everyone has. Maybe you can give coaching lessons to others in your team on how to prioritize the workload? You might teach these skills to engineers who write design specifications, for example. There is always a challenge in getting engineers to communicate a message clearly in a concise way that everyone can understand.

Summary

Most of what I have discussed here is aimed at getting you out of your comfort zone and interacting with others in your organization. In my opinion, this is the best way to start on the road to having influence in your organization. Elevator speeches are great, but put your money where your mouth is and, instead of just telling people what you do, show them. We have so many useful transferable skills, but we need to start showcasing them. The next time you are in the kitchen making yourself a coffee, start a conversation with someone you haven't talked to before. Find out what they do within the organization and, more importantly, let them know what you do and what your value to the company is. The more people who know what a technical communicator does, the better.

CAROL LEAHY *is a technical author for Siemens PLM Software in Cambridge, UK, where she writes API documentation. She has been a technical author since 2011 and an amateur baker almost her whole life. She holds a Bachelor's degree in neuroscience and a Master's in interactive media. You can follow her and her culinary efforts on Twitter* @yellowshoe82.

2015 Technical Communication Summit Conference-at-a-Glance (21–24 June 2015, Columbus, Ohio)

	Saturday, 20 June	Sunday, 21 June	Monday, 22 June	Tuesday, 23 June	Wednesday, 24 June
8:00 AM		8:00–Noon Leadership Program			
9:00 AM	8:30–4:30 Preconference Certificate Sessions and Workshops (additional fee)	8:30–4:30 Preconference Certificate Sessions and Workshops (additional fee)	8:30–9:15 Education Break 9:00–5:00 Expo Open 9:45–10:30 Education	8:30–9:15 Education Break 9:00–5:00 Expo Open 9:45–10:30 Education	8:30–9:15 Education Sessions Break 9:45–10:30 Education Sessions
10:00 AM					Break
11:00 AM			11:00–Noon Speed Networking 10:30–1:00 Break	11:00-12:30 Communities Reception and Awards 10:30–1:00 Break	11:00–12:15 Closing Keynote
Noon		Noon–5:00 Adobe Workshop (preregistration required)	Expo Open, cont.	Expo Open, cont.	
1:00 PM			1:00–1:45 Education Break 2:15–3:00 Education	1:00–1:45 Education Break 2:15–3:00 Education	
2:00 PM					
3:00 PM			Break 3:45–4:30 Education	Raffle Prize Drawings Expo Open, cont.	Break 3:45–4:30 Education
4:00 PM					
5:00 PM			5:00–6:00 Annual Business Meeting	5:15–7:30 Honors Reception	
6:00 PM		5:30–6:45 Opening Keynote Ribbon Cutting	6:00–7:00 Student Reception		
7:00 PM		7:00–8:30 Welcome Reception in the Exhibit Hall	7:00 Northeast Ohio Chapter Event: Take Me Out to the Ball Game (offsite)		
8:00 PM				8:00 Honors After-Party (offsite)	

Results of the 2015 STC Election

BY AIESSA MOYNA |
Chair of Nominating Committee

STC IS PLEASED to announce the results of its 2015 election.

Voting concluded at 5:00 PM EDT (GMT-4) on 6 April. Of 4,320 eligible voters, 471 (10.90%) cast ballots.

Congratulations to the winners, and a special thanks to all candidates for their dedication to STC and willingness to devote their time and energy to improving our Society. Note: According to the STC Bylaws, the results become official when announced at the Annual Business Meeting at the STC Summit in Columbus on Monday, 22 June.

President

Bernard Aschwanden
(automatically succeeds from Vice President)

Vice President

Adriane Hunt*	365
Christopher Ward	103

Treasurer

Jane Wilson*	459

Director (two spots)

Cindy Pao*	206
Craig Baehr*	201
Lisa Pietrangeli	192
Kirsty Taylor	166
Kirk St.Amant	162

Nominating Committee (two spots)

Cindy Currie*	326
Viqui Dill*	314
Ramesh Aiyyangar	174
Rick Lippincott	109

** indicates winner.*

Exciting Changes to STC's Technical Communication Summit '15

STC HAS BEEN hard at work updating and adding new events to the 2015 Summit to increase not only your ROI but also your FUN! Take a look at the new and improved events happening at the 2015 Summit, 21–24 June in Columbus, Ohio.

More Networking Opportunities

The Summit now offers **three** networking receptions included in your registration. Don't miss out on the fun at the Welcome Reception, Communities Reception, and new Honors Reception!

We've replaced the traditional banquet in favor of a livelier reception format, scheduled to start after the education sessions end on Tuesday. The Honors Reception will feature hors d'oeuvres and appetizer stations and will celebrate this year's honorees, including Fellows and Associate Fellows. Join your STC colleagues in networking with and congratulating these individuals.

Also new this year is the opportunity for Speed Networking, scheduled to take place on Tuesday in the Expo Hall. Looking to branch out and make new connections? This event will be the ultimate networking opportunity at the Summit and put you in contact with industry movers and shakers.

New Education Tracks

The education tracks have been reworked based on direct feedback from Summit attendees and the latest industry trends. These tracks are designed to allow you to efficiently plan your educational opportunities at the Summit. With over 80 sessions and seven specialized tracks, you'll walk away with applicable knowledge for your particular job. Tracks include:

- Art, Design, and Visual Communication
- Leadership and Management
- Tools and Technology
- Training and Research
- Writing and Communication
- API Documentation
- Consulting and Small Business Management

Closing Keynote

Wrap up your time at the Summit with closing keynote speaker **Denise Jacobs** as she speaks on *Infinite Possibilities* in the workplace. Sometimes making choices in our career paths is difficult. Wouldn't it be helpful to have guidelines to help us make decisions that open up your options rather than shut them down? In Denise's closing keynote, discover how choosing creativity, a growth mindset, finding your Flow, and being a Maker puts you on the path of having infinite possibilities in your career, creating a clear path to a future where you can not only be awesome, but also do meaningful work.

For complete Summit information, including how to register, education sessions, and a schedule overview, visit *summit.stc.org*. We look forward to seeing you in Columbus!

View the Summit Program Online

WHETHER YOU'VE ALREADY registered for the Summit or are looking for a reason to do so, check out the complete Summit schedule online at the Summit website (*http://summit.stc.org*).

To view the program, click on Schedule Overview under the Summit '15 tab in the top menu. There you'll find an overview of the entire week as well as a link to our social site, *Lanyrd.com,* which has the entire program organized by date and time. You can also click through to the *Lanyrd.com* site for full descriptions of all the sessions. The entire program with full session descriptions will also be available in the official Summit printed program, which will be provided to each attendee at the Summit and in PDF form shortly before the conference.

If you haven't registered for the Summit yet, we invite you to review the program and discover all the great reasons to join us in Columbus—then register today to ensure you don't miss a thing!

Crowdsource Your Way to Closed Captioning

www.shutterstock.com/VLADGRIN

BY LINDA ROBERTS | *Associate Fellow* and **LISA COOK** | *Fellow*

AS TECHNICAL COMMUNICATORS, we understand that no matter how well we craft a message, we must still deliver it. With increased use of video in corporate, technical, and marketing communications, providing captions for video is essential for delivering the message to the intended audience. Typically, when we think of captions, we think of people with hearing impairments. However, captions are useful in a broader range of use cases:

- Where one either cannot hear the sound (commuter train, airport) or does not want to use headphones
- When the viewer is a non-native speaker, so merely listening to the language may not convey the full meaning
- For a viewer with cognitive impairments or attention deficits, where a supporting channel aids learning

Providing captions directly in video can address these cases, in addition to meeting accessibility needs of people with hearing impairments. In addition to captions, which summarize, full video transcripts also meet broader needs. Text transcripts can be found via search engines and increase overall consumption of information.

One global company found these results quite surprising. After shifting from primarily email and intranet text to podcast and video for essential internal messages, the R&D communications team received concerns by employees who had difficulty hearing the video and who knew of others reticent to voice their concerns. The team agreed on a trial to provide transcripts for the podcasts and videos for one month and then to compare the response rate (hits, shares, comments). After one month, they found that the total consumption of the information had significantly increased. They received positive feedback in particular by non-native speakers, who appreciated being able to read along with the transcript. Mobile technical personnel also expressed appreciation because they could download a transcript and read it on their devices in transit, searching for keywords.

Providing transcripts and captions does require additional work and skill sets. However, technical communication skills may predispose us to contribute. In celebration of Global Accessibility Awareness Day

This column shares information about accessibility requirements and techniques, and introduces standards and policies that might affect your products. If you have feedback, contact Linda Roberts at lerober1@yahoo.com *or Lisa Cook at* Lisa.Cook@sas.com.

(which is always the third Thursday of May) last year, one large software firm decided to "crowd source" transcription and captioning.

Promoting the effort through a cross-divisional voluntary advocacy and education group, the firm recruited many enthusiastic volunteers to first transcribe several dozen, short (five-minute) videos prominent on the firm's external support site. In addition, the firm recruited several volunteers familiar with TechSmith's Camtasia software. This software is used to join captions, derived from the transcript, and merge them to appear as the video rolls. To kick off the efforts, the volunteers met for a brief training session to build awareness of the process and to address concerns.

Over approximately the next week, transcription volunteers each transcribed two to three videos. To make the efforts easier, the transcribers started by using the automatic captions files that were generated by YouTube. Since these files were automatically machine generated, the quality varied *a lot*. If the video had a lot of background noise or had a soft-spoken speaker, then the file's quality was typically much lower. The files also had no punctuation, and if there were multiple speakers, then their tracks weren't broken out separately. Some transcripts were actually quite funny. But it is usually easier to start with something—even if it is low quality—rather than starting from nothing. We'd go into detail about how to generate these files, but Karen Mardahl wrote an excellent *Intercom* article (January 2011) titled "Captioning Videos on YouTube" that detailed the process. Volunteers estimated that to accurately transcribe a five-minute technical video, it took 30–45 minutes, depending on their familiarity with the material.

The transcription volunteers were also made aware of a free VLC media player (at *www.videolan.org/vlc/index.html*) to use to slow down video playback. The player helped to avoid the continual pause and replay during transcription.

The transcripts were then provided to the Camtasia volunteers who created and merged the captions in the software. These volunteers estimated that it took them two to three hours per video to integrate the captions. Note that the Camtasia users were individuals who used it generally, and not to produce professional training or video resources.

At the end of two weeks, the firm was able to re-post 40 videos, which now included captions. Feedback has been positive, and participants have expressed interest in repeating the project.

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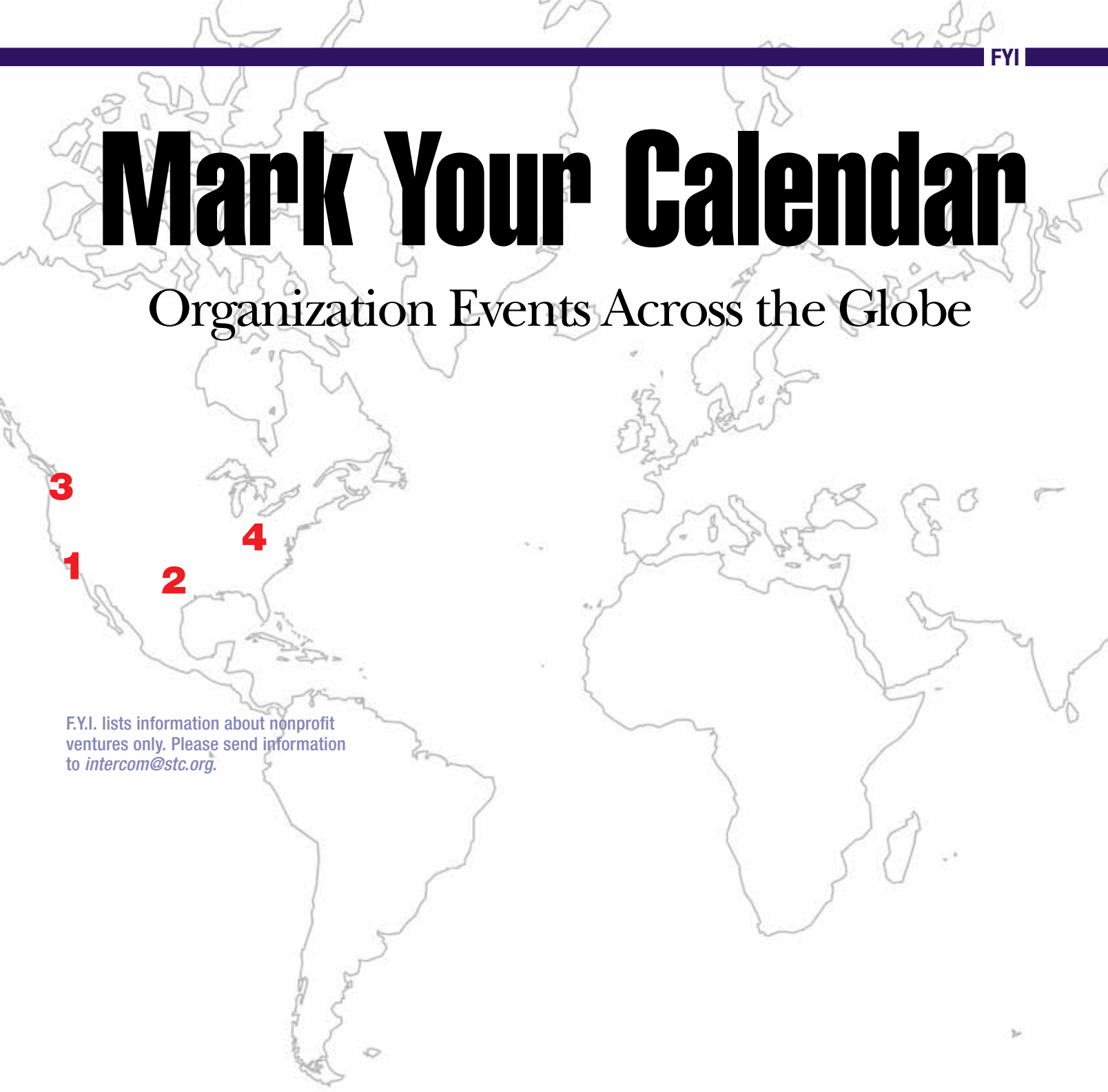

F.Y.I. lists information about nonprofit ventures only. Please send information to *intercom@stc.org.*

1 16-19 April
The **Association of Independent Information Professionals** will hold its annual conference in Irvine, CA. For more information, contact:
AIIP
+1 (225) 408-4400
office@aiip.org
www.aiip.org/Conference

2 24–29 April
The **International Society for Performance Improvement (ISPI)** will hold its Performance Improvement Conference at the Hyatt Regency in San Antonio, TX. For more information, contact:
ISPI
+1 (301) 587-8570
conference@ispi.org
www.ispi.org/AC2015

3 29 April–1 May
The **American Society for Indexing (ASI)** will be holding its annual conference in Seattle, WA. For more information, contact:
ASI
conference@asindexing.org
www.asindexing.org/conference-2015/

4 21–24 June
The **Society for Technical Communication** hosts the Technical Communication Summit in Columbus, OH. For more information, contact:
STC
+1 (703) 522-4114

* STC-related event

Where's My Office? At My Keyboard in Different Places

BY BARRIE BYRON | *Associate Fellow*

MY COMMUTE TO work is either very short or very long. On my short commutes, I embrace my gratitude as I stroll down the hall to work in my home office in Boynton Beach, FL, or walk down a flight of stairs in Lawrenceville, NJ. Average commute time is less than one minute. On long commutes, I practice the art of resilience as I support the commercial air travel industry on my travels between my two home offices. Average commute time is six hours.

Along with an ever-growing segment of our workforce, I'm fortunate to have a geographically flexible job. We have all heard "have laptop, will travel." Not always easy, not always fun, but definitely doable. I'm an opportunistic worker with many names: remote writer, work-at-home information developer, OTTO (other than traditional office) worker, and virtual office employee.

My current job as a technical writer is my fourth position that came with an office in a box and without a geographic work location. I work for a high tech Silicon Valley startup with globally distributed teams. Every call is a video call, so I can see my colleagues in their different environments. I was inspired to tidy my office backgrounds. I thrive when I am able to build solid relationships at work. With today's collaborative work culture, enhanced productivity software, and connective communication technology, geography is no longer a barrier to working well on teams.

Life is great! It took me many years to manifest productive work environments. I worked hard and made mistakes as I developed the discipline and skills that are required to work well on my own and in a variety of environments.

Boynton Beach "oasis" home office

Hawaii ohana porch office, November 2014

Most of my family lives on the big island of Hawaii. My annual commute to Kona, Hawaii is very long: more than 15 hours and longer than 5,000 miles. Because my commute is so long, I stay on the island for at least 3 weeks and create a variety of home offices in paradise. In 2014, I was a guest for 10 days in a beautiful resort-like downstairs apartment at a friend's place. This "ohana" was an ideal quiet location for my 3:30 a.m. Hawaii time start to my 8:30 a.m. Eastern time work day. The next 10 days I was invited to house sit at a friend's acre homestead. I fed the chickens and cats and picked papayas during my stay.

There are many ways to find a suitable home office. Our home in south Florida is listed on the *www.homeexchange.com* website that features prominently in the Hollywood movie "The Holiday" starring Kate Winslet, Jude Law, Hugh Grant, and Cameron Diaz. When we're away, our home exchange membership creates the opportunity to invite like-minded home exchangers to stay in our home, water our plants, and tend our gardens. When it's time, we go stay in their home. This year, I'll work in Richmond, VA for two weeks while my mom and I fulfill our lifelong quest to visit Shenandoah National Park and significant American history attractions, including Monticello and Historic Colonial Williamsburg. I plan to work my regular schedule in the home office of our Virginia home exchange partner. How long is your commute? Where will you work this year? Reach out if you are a like-minded traveler and have an interesting home office that you want to swap.

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